

## SELF-INFLICTED SUFFERING DOES NOT SANCTIFY! (Colossian 2:20-23)

We humans are **strange** creatures, aren't we? Here are **some examples** of what I mean. Even though I don't remember the context or the details, I remember being told as a kid "Do not look at the bright light when someone is welding!" Having **heard that**—and being told it could cause serious eye damage if I did look at it—from that point forward I **had no desire** to look at the light, right? **Wrong!** I wanted to look at it all the more!

--Or how about this: We want to **know the truth** about a lot of things—and will go to great lengths to research something in order to find out the truth! But when it comes to truth **about God**, we either aren't interested—or look for truth about God **everywhere except the place** He has given us the truth—in His Word!

--Here's another: We love **"free stuff"**—and often times will accept free stuff—even if we don't need it. **Why? Because it's free!** But—when it comes to receiving **salvation as a free gift** from God—many reject the offer! Why? Because **it can't be that easy!** 'I have to **work for** it; I have to **earn it**,' is a common mindset.

--Here's one more: By nature, we **don't like rules!** We don't like to be **told what to do**; we want to be "large and in charge." And, yet—when it comes to **spiritual** things—many of us **do like** rules! We like the idea that if I do "A, B, and C," I will become a more "spiritual" person!

And that tendency is what God through Paul is warning us about in the last half of Colossians 2! Please turn there and notice what it says in vs 16—a verse we looked at a couple of weeks ago. Here Paul is exposing the false teaching of **legalism**. **What is legalism?** The teaching that **salvation**—or **spirituality**—is dependent on **the keeping of rules**—many of which are manmade! "Don't be judged"—don't allow yourself to be condemned—because you don't follow **the rules of false teachers** that they say leads to holiness!

In vs 18, Paul warns them about the false teaching of **mysticism**. **What is mysticism?** The teaching that you can have greater "spiritual experiences" if you follow their lead and "intrude"—venture into—the spiritual, unseen world, where angels are! Hidden in the message that you can experience more—like the false teachers supposedly did—is the suggestion that Christ is not enough!

And that brings us to verses 20-23. Please follow along as I read these last 4 verses. Most commentators suggest that in these last four verses, Paul is dealing with the erroneous teaching of **"asceticism."** **What is asceticism?** It is the doctrine—the teaching—"that one can reach a high spiritual state through the practice of extreme self-denial or self-mortification." (<https://www.christianity.com/wiki/christian-terms/what-is-ascetic-asceticism.html>).

We see that specifically referred to in the middle of vs 23 in the phrase "neglecting of the body." But we'll see as we go through this passage that God through Paul plainly declares that "self-inflicted suffering does not make us holy!"

Maybe you noticed this as I was reading; if not, you'll see it now! **Three of the four** verses I just read make up **one question**. The question begins in vs 20—and ends with a question mark at the end vs 22. But it is not a "normal," informational-gathering kind of question like "who brought that nummy-looking dessert today?" Instead, it is an "if/why" question, commonly referred to in the Greek as a **conditional sentence**.

So **what is** the question? In a nutshell, it is this: ***If you have died with Christ and are separated from the rule-keeping way that the world teaches to become righteous, why subject yourselves to those same man-made rules?***

First, let's consider... **1. The doctrine behind the "if/why" question**

So what is the doctrine—what is the teaching—that is embedded within this question?

A. True believers are considered dead—and risen—with Christ

Do you believe that? Do you believe that true believers are considered dead—and risen—with Christ? You **need to believe it** because the Bible **declares it!** We see that truth declared in verse 12 "Buried with Him in baptism, wherein ye are also risen with Him..."

We also see that truth in verses like Romans 6:4 “Therefore we are buried with Him by baptism into death...”—and Galatians 2:20 “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live....”

And we’ll **see that truth again** when we get to chapter 3, verse 3 – “For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.”

**Does Paul doubt** whether these believers are dead with Christ? Is that **the reason** for the question? No! As mentioned earlier this is a **conditional sentence** in the Greek. Without getting overly technical, this particular construction—a **first-class** conditional sentence in the Greek—**points to certainty**—not doubt. In other words, them being dead with Christ is **assumed to be true** for the sake of argument.

So the question **is not**, “Were they dead with Christ?” The question is, “**Since** ye are dead with Christ, why do you subject yourselves to these man-made rules?”

And that brings us to...B. True believers can be misled about the way to become holy

How do we know that? Because if it was **not a possibility**, God wouldn’t have **led Paul to ask** the question! Not only that, notice what it says in the middle of the vs: “why, as though living in the world, **are ye subject to** ordinances...”

It doesn’t say “**have been** subject to”—as in the **past**. And it doesn’t say “**might be** subject to”—as in the **future**. **What does** it say? “**Are subject to**”—present tense! **David Pao** put it like this: “...Paul is presenting a real danger, and it is entirely possible that some have already believed these false teachers.” (*Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament – Colossians & Philemon*, page 194).

## **2. The dismay behind the “if/why” question**

As you read the question—and really ponder what God through Paul is saying—you can’t help but get the impression that Paul was dismayed...and disappointed...and perplexed as to why they subjected themselves to something that had **absolutely no hold** on them—or **any benefit** to them!

It reminds me of what Paul said in Galatians 1:6 “I marvel that ye are so soon removed from Him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel:”

But Paul doesn’t **just imply his dismay** and disappointment, he goes on to give **a description** of what the false teachers were teaching!

## **3. The description of the teaching that prompted the question**

Paul describes what the false teachers were teaching in at least **three** different ways.

A. Their teaching was works-oriented instead of faith-based. We see that in vs 21: “(Touch not; taste not; handle not);” Paul brought this up once already in the verses we looked at two weeks ago—and I briefly referred to in the introduction. Verse 16 says ‘Don’t allow yourselves to feel condemned by others by their rules regarding meat...or drink...or holy days...or the new moon...or of sabbath days.’

**Doing works**—like **following rules**—doesn’t **save us** and get us into heaven! We know the verses, don’t we? Ephesians 2:8-9 “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: <sup>9</sup>**Not of works**, lest any man should boast.” Titus 3:5 “**Not by works** of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy He saved us,”

But Paul was writing to **believers**! And even though we as believers know that works don’t **save us**, we need to be reminded that works don’t “**sanctify**”—meaning **grow us in holiness**—either! You know these verses, too! Galatians 3:2-3 “This only would I learn of you, **Received ye the Spirit** by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? **having begun in the Spirit**, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?”

They—and us—receive the Holy Spirit when we become a child of God through faith. That is “having begun in the Spirit” means. How are we “made perfect”—meaning **mature**?

**Not by the flesh**—meaning self-effort or works! **We grow** as a child of God in the same way **we became** a child of God: **by faith**—not by keeping rules!

So Paul was dismayed that they had subjected themselves to keeping ordinances—rules—because keeping them doesn’t make us holy! God is the One who makes us holy, but we do have a part in the process!

A **second description** of what they taught is this: B. Their commandments were man-made—not God-given. We see that in the middle of vs 22: “...after the commandments and doctrines of men.” We’re not going to spend a lot of time on this one because we’ve looked at it a number of times already as we’ve gone through this chapter. But here again is what Jesus said about choosing the commandments of men over the Word of God! Mark 7:6, 9 “He answered and said unto them, Well hath Esaias prophesied of **you hypocrites**, as it is written, This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. <sup>9</sup>And He said unto them, Full well ye **reject the commandment of God**, that ye may keep your own tradition.”

So it’s one thing to submit yourself to **God’s commandments** to try to be holy! But it is **irrational**—it doesn’t make any sense—to think that keeping “the commandments and doctrines **of men**” will bring you closer to God!

We have yet a third description—found in vs 23—and it is this:

C. Their teaching promoted “showiness” on the outside—but no heart change on the inside!

Notice what it says in vs 23 “Which things”—a reference to the commandments and doctrines of men they were teaching—“have indeed a shew of wisdom...”

Don’t let the word “shew” (s-h-e-w; not s-h-o-e) throw you off or confuse you! Regardless of the pronunciation (shoe or show), the meaning is **show!** There was a **show** of wisdom—but it was only a show!

One aspect of their “show of wisdom” was “**will** worship.” To “will” something is to **desire** it—so to “desire to worship” is a good thing! Except, **that is not** what the Greek word behind it means! According to **HELPS Word-studies** in Biblehub, it is “...*self-willed* religion, defined by the desires of the **human will**... This form of “worship,” which is accomplished “by *self*”... exalts the *worshiper* at God’s expense.”

Other translations have: “self-imposed worship” (NIV); “self-made religion” (ESV; NASB); and “self-imposed religion” (NKJV).

They also promoted a show of **humility**, without having **genuine** humility—like the Pharisee in the temple in Luke 18! And then we have the phrase “neglecting of the body.” **What kind of** “neglecting of the body” did these false teachers promote? **We don’t know!**

But **we do know** this: **asceticism**—the belief that you can attain a higher spiritual state through the practice of extreme self-denial—did not “die out” after Paul wrote this letter warning them against it!

There have been groups—and individuals—throughout the years who have **voluntarily mistreated their bodies** in an effort to become “more spiritual.” Here are some examples, all taken from an article entitled “Unusual Types of Asceticism and Ascetic Practices” (<https://catalog.obitel-minsk.com/blog/2022/12/unusual-types-of-asceticism-and-ascetic-practices>)

- 1) In the 5<sup>th</sup> century, a man named Simeon lived on top of a pillar for 37 years.
- 2) An ascetic named Baradates made a tiny wooden hut on a cliff that was so small he could not stand upright in it. Another man’s hut was so small that he could only fit in a bent position with his head on his knees.
- 3) Others slept in coffins to remind themselves of their eventual death.
- 4) Some ascetics were called “grazers.” Guess what they did? “Completely abandoning clothes and cultivation of the land, they ate grass together with the animals.”
- 5) And then there were those who wore chains, some so heavy that they could hardly move! Often times, the chains would rub the flesh raw and create wounds.

Why purposely inflict pain upon your body like this? One man—Thalilaëus—“was convinced of being destined for eternal torment. So, he subjected his body to moderate punishments in order to reduce the severity of future torments.”

The author of the article then poses this question: “What is the meaning of such a path of self-sacrifice and patience?” Here is part of the answer he provides: “...if hurting the body helps to heal the soul and strengthen the spirit, then this is regarded as righteousness.” Sad, isn’t it; to think you can **gain righteousness** by inflicting—on yourself—bodily harm and pain?

But in addition to **Paul’s description** of the false teaching that was being promoted, he also provided...

#### 4. The deficiency of what was being taught

What was God's assessment of the "helpfulness" or "usefulness" of asceticism?

##### A. It had no lasting value

We see that in vs 22 — "**Which all are to perish** with the using..." What does **that mean**? "Touch not; taste not; handle not"—referred to in vs 21—and "meat and drink"—referred to in vs 16—all point to that which you put **into your body**. What happens to something that you eat and drink? **Nothing**, right?

**Wrong!** If you have teeth—or **dentures**—what you put in your mouth gets **chewed up** into little pieces and swallowed! And then it is broken down **into even smaller pieces** by your stomach! The point? What you eat **does not continue** in its original state! It is consumed...it is used up...it "perishes." Not only that, you eventually have to eat and drink again!

So if what you eat and **drink gets consumed**—and only helps your body for a **short** time—how can it be of spiritual benefit to your **eternal** soul? It can't—and that's the point that is being made!

##### B. It does not curtail our sin nature

We see that in the last half of vs 23, where we have the phrase "...not in any honour to **the satisfying of the flesh**." What does that mean? One commentary I have says this verse is "almost impossible to translate" (Pao, 196). I'm not sure I'd go that far, but it certainly **isn't an easy one!**

One key to understanding the verse has to do with the word "honour." "Honour" comes from the Greek word "tee-MAY" and **does mean** honor—but it **can also mean** "value" or "worth."

But...to say that their self-imposed worship...and false humility...and neglecting of the body **has no value** in satisfying the flesh—**meaning their sin nature**—seems to be the opposite of the point that God through Paul is trying to make!

So how do we handle what seems like a contradiction? The answer lies in the two-letter word that follows the word "honour." **What** is that word? "To!" The preposition that "to" comes from—"pros"—has a number of different meanings besides "to." One of them—and the one that fits here based on the context—is "**against**." So a better translation would be: "not of any value against the satisfying [gratification] of the flesh."

Paul's argument, then, is this: 'This wisdom that the false teachers thought they had—demonstrated in self-made religion...and false humility...and severe treatment of their body—did not do anything to restrain their sinful, selfish nature. In fact, it strengthened their sin nature because it fed their pride!'

Lastly, let's consider... **5. The decisions we need to make when considering the question**

So why did God include these verses—and this question in particular—in His Word? It wasn't just for the Colossian believers, was it? It applies to us as well. But how?

Here, once again, is the question: **If you have died with Christ and are separated from the rule-keeping way that the world teaches to become righteous, why subject yourselves to those same man-made rules?**

So what are decisions we may need to make in light of this question?

##### A. Make sure you are dead with Christ!

What do I mean by that? It's simply another way of saying, Are you a child of God? Are you born again? Are you "in Christ?"

Every **true believer** is counted as dead with Christ—but not everyone is a true believer! We need to **have** the Son—not just know about Him! **I John 5:12** "He that hath the Son hath life, and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life."

**John 1:12** "But as many as received Him [Jesus], to them gave He power [authority, the right] to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His [Jesus'] name:"

Here's a second decision you may need to make:

##### B. Reject the teaching—and thinking—that you can become holy by keeping rules!

Does God want us to be holy? Yes; He does!

I Thessalonians 4:7 "For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness."

I Peter 1:15 "But as He which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation;"

If keeping rules could make you holy, the Pharisees would have been the holiest people around in Jesus' day! But they weren't! Jesus rebuked them more than He rebuked anyone else! Why?

Because on the outside they were clean—but on the inside they were full of iniquity!

C. Reject the teaching—and thinking—that self-inflicted suffering will make you holy!

Do I lose sleep over fearing that some of you are going to start living on a pillar...or sleeping in coffins...or begin grazing on grass...or wearing heavy chains? Nope; that hasn't even crossed my mind!

But it is possible to entertain the thought that "God owes me"—not because I have inflicted **suffering on myself**, but because He has allowed me to suffer so much in this life!

Do people think that way? I know some that do!

Don't think that way! God doesn't "owe" anybody anything, does He?

Can suffering make you holy? Yes—if it causes you to depend on yourself less—and on God more! Paul wanted his "thorn in flesh" removed, didn't he? What was God's answer to Paul's request that it be removed? "My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness."

Paul's response? II Corinthians 12:9b-10 "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. <sup>10</sup>Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong."

Lastly, D. Work on your relationship with God!

Holiness comes from God; He "grows us" in holiness as we spend time with Him!

Does a relationship with God take work? Yes; it does!

--It takes time

--It takes humility

--It takes daily surrender

But God promises that as we behold Him in His Word—and depend on Him to help us obey what He says—we are changed by Him from the inside out!

So are you working on your relationship with God? That is what God wants us to do—daily—not just once in a while. Are you doing that?